

FIGURE 1-10

The Barnes & Noble Web site is a prime example of a well-designed and successful commercial Web site.



## Understanding Internet Demographics

There are tons of “facts” available about the Internet. Unfortunately, most of these statistics can be classified by one of Mark Twain’s most famous quips, “There are lies, damned lies, and statistics.” As with so many of the greatest American writer’s sayings, the truth of this rides into our present and, doubtless, our future as well.

### Finding good information

It’s easy to find anything you want to know about the Internet — just look on the Internet. But how do you know if you can trust what you find? One of the simplest ways is also one of the best — know the reputation of the source. If someone’s Web site says that there are 8 billion people with Internet access, you might want to know who the source is and how many planets the source thinks are hooked up to the Internet.

TABLE 1-4

## Commercial Web Sites

Site	URL
Australian Bush Flower Essences	<a href="http://www.ausflowers.com.au">www.ausflowers.com.au</a>
Gibson Research Corporation	<a href="http://grc.com">grc.com</a>
Jagex Software	<a href="http://jagex.com">jagex.com</a>
Janes Information Group	<a href="http://www.janes.com">www.janes.com</a>
Magix Entertainment Software	<a href="http://www.magix.net">www.magix.net</a>
Ptaah	<a href="http://www.ptaah.com/home.html">www.ptaah.com/home.html</a>
Staples Office Supplies	<a href="http://staples.com">staples.com</a>
The History Channel	<a href="http://www.historychannel.com/ontv/index.html">www.historychannel.com/ontv/index.html</a>
TV Guide	<a href="http://tvguide.com">tvguide.com</a>

The same is true, however, of even less obviously suspect figures. News stories are, unfortunately, one of the least reliable of all statistical sources, because they are generally written in a hurry by people who do not really understand statistics. They also often fall prey to the fault of accepting statistics from yet other news stories. This can easily lead to the kind of situation where one reporter gets something wrong, but the story is published in a major publication. Because another reporter believes that anything in *The Wall Street Journal* or *The New York Times* must be true, the figure is incorporated into yet another article, which is taken as gospel by someone else, creating a chain that perpetuates a number that is far removed from its original source.

We'd be inclined to trust (without more than a reflexive professional doubt) a report from companies such as comScore (see Figure 1-11), Nielsen, or WebSideStory, all of which are professional outfits that have proved reliable in the past.

Table 1-5 lists the URLs of some of the top Internet research firms.

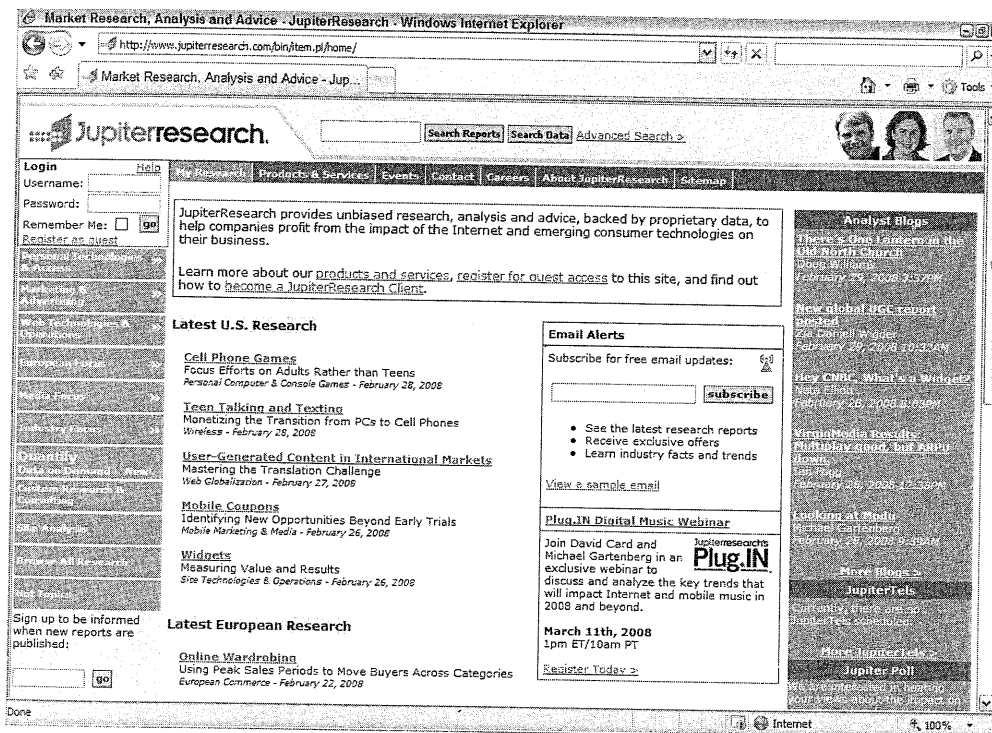
You can never really trust any statistics, no matter what the source, unless you know how those figures were arrived at — not if you're going to bet your future on them. Any reputable research company is glad to provide you with the details of the methodology they used in arriving at certain figures.

**NOTE**

Neither the numbers nor the methodology is necessarily free. Most of these companies do issue some public reports, but they make their livings conducting custom research projects or selling the results of their own initiated studies. Often, the publicly released figures are only the tip of the iceberg. You can sometimes cut down on the cost of conducting a study by participating in an *omnibus study*, in which a group of companies each pay part of the costs, while all share in the results.

FIGURE 1-11

comScore is one of the best sources of Internet facts.



## Surveying site visitors

When it comes to learning about your particular site's visitors — or what they like — there's not much of a substitute for simply asking them. There are drawbacks, however, to the survey concept. The biggest problem is that people don't always respond truthfully for a variety of reasons, sometimes with the best of intentions, sometimes out of plain vanity. If you ask people whether they read tabloids or intellectual magazines, for example, the vast majority of them say that they don't read tabloids. While this has proved to be true in many different surveys, tabloids outsell intellectual magazines by millions of copies, so someone's not telling the truth. Remember, when devising your survey questions, that any time you ask people to admit something that's less than flattering to his or her self-image, you are asking those people to respond less than truthfully.

This phenomenon is widely recognized in the consumer research field, and a common (and simple) way around it was developed long ago. The trick is to ask other questions that help qualify the responses. The confirmatory questions should not be close to the sensitive one, but later, and scattered about within the survey. For example, you might ask visitors to choose their favorite

### Staying deliberately obsolete

That said, there are good and solid reasons to deliberately ignore even a well-established Internet technology in favor of still older approaches. And those reasons are stability and demographic reach. As new standards for Web design and applications emerge, anyone on the leading edge of implementing them will quickly find that the latest Web browsers (despite anything their makers say) only partially support the standards when they are first introduced.

To further confuse the situation, the average Web surfer doesn't keep up to date with the latest Web browser. Thus, even if the newest versions of browsers finally get around to supporting the latest advance in its entirety, you'll still lose the audience share that uses old browsers if your site uses the latest ideas. If you have committed to following hot on the heels of the standards committees, your site had better be an experimental one and not meant to serve any practical purpose.

The basic question you need to consider is whether or not you want to reach the vast majority of Web surfers — those who are using Web browsers that are, at least to some degree, obsolete. If so, you should consider using the lowest level of Internet technology that still achieves your basic goals.

On the other hand, if your target audience is users of higher-level technology — you run a Web site that has nothing but tutorials on Macromedia Flash, for example — you can confidently expect that the only low-tech visitors to your site will have wandered in by accident.

### Establishing a budget

How much are you willing to spend on your site? This question (more than any other one) sets the practical limitations on what you're able to do.

If you're whipping up a personal site, the odds are pretty good that all you need to invest is nothing more than the amount that you have already put into getting online in the first place. All your needs are probably thoroughly covered by the basic amount of Web space that your ISP supplies as a basic part of their service. If the amount of Web space your ISP provides is inadequate, you can doubtless find plenty more available for little or no further investment.

You need to sit down and figure out exactly how much money you're willing to commit to your project if you're going for anything beyond that rock-bottom minimum. If the money's going to come out of your own pocket, you have to take a hard look at how much you're willing to lose, because every Internet startup is a gamble. Unless you're very rich or planning on a really small operation, you may have to put a substantial percentage of your wealth into the first year of your site's operation. Are you willing to risk giving up all your disposable income to try to make your dream come true? Half of it? Ten percent?

Whether or not your site is designed to generate an income, it still costs money to run. And, while there are exceptions to the rule, the best sites tend to cost the most money. Are you passionate enough about what you want to do on the Web to divert that money from all the other things you could do with it? If the answer is "yes," then you stand a better chance of success. But if you're hesitant about committing, you may want to think twice — maybe even thrice.

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## Tips

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